

**Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall**  
***a brief biography***  
British Muslim Heritage  
**Marmaduke Pickthall**  
***a brief biography***

‘Action is the Life of all and if thou dost not Act, thou dost Nothing.’

(Gerrard Winstanley)

Before we consider the life-story of the British Muslim and Koranic translator, Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, it is as well to recall that aspect of the practice of every believer without which there are only ashes: holiness of life.

In the case of Pickthall, this was a luminous, steadily progressing reality which impressed all who came into contact with him. Even his unbelieving first biographer, Anne Fremantle, opined that ‘had he changed from evangelical or even from high church Anglicanism to the Roman faith, doubtless the machinery of sanctification would have by now been set to work.’ He was a man of discreet charity, the extent of whose generosity was only discovered after his death. He turned down lucrative and prestigious speaking tours and the pleasures of travel in favour of his last and, in his eyes, greatest project, acting as headmaster to Muslim boys in Hyderabad. [Dakhan, India]

He witnessed the dismemberment of his beloved Ottoman Caliphate while rejecting bitterness and calls for violent revenge, convinced that Allah’s verdict was just, and that in the circumstances of the age, Islam’s victory would come through changing an unjust world from within. Above all, he

was a man who constantly kept Allah and His providence in mind.

Pickthall's humility did not prevent him from taking a rightful pride in his ancestry, which he could trace back to a knight of William the Conqueror's day, Sir Roger de Poictu, from whom his odd surname derives. The family, long settled in Cumberland, came south in Dutch William's time, and Pickthall's father Charles, an Anglican parson, was appointed to a living near Woodbridge in Suffolk. Charles' wife, whom he married late in life, was Mary O'Brien, who despite her Irish name was a staunchly nonconformist daughter of Admiral Donat Henry O'Brien, a hero of the same Napoleonic war which brought Sheikh Abdullah Quilliam's grandfather fame as master of *Victory* at Trafalgar. O'Brien, immortalised by Marryat in *Masterman Ready*, passed on some of his heroic impulses to his grandson Marmaduke, who throughout his life championed a rather Shavian ideal of the saint as warrior. It may be no coincidence that Pickthall, Quilliam and, before them, Lord Byron, who all found their vocation as rebellious lovers of the East, were the grandsons of naval heroes.

Marmaduke was born in 1875, and when his father died five years later the family sold the Suffolk rectory and moved to the capital. For the little boy the trauma of the exodus from a country idyll to a cold and cheerless house in London was a deep blow to the soul, and his later delight in the freedom of traditional life in the Middle East may have owed much to that early formative transition. The claustrophobia was only made worse when he entered Harrow, whose arcane rituals and fagging system he was later to send up in his novel *Sir Limpidus*. Friends were his only consolation: perhaps his closest was Winston Churchill.

Once the sloth and bullying of Harrow were behind him he was able to indulge a growing range of youthful passions. In the Jura he acquired his lifelong love of mountaineering, and in Wales and Ireland he learned Welsh and Gaelic. So remarkable a gift for languages impelled his teachers to put him forward for a Foreign Office vacancy; yet he failed the exam. On the rebound, as it were, he proposed to Muriel Smith, the girl who was to become his wife. She accepted, only to lose her betrothed for several years in one of the sudden picaresque changes of direction which were to mark his later life. Hoping to learn enough Arabic to earn him a consular job in Palestine, and with introductions in Jerusalem, Pickthall had sailed for Port Said. He was not yet eighteen years old.

The Orient came as a revelation. Later in life he wrote: ‘When I read *The Arabian Nights* I see the daily life of Damascus, Jerusalem, Aleppo, Cairo, and the other cities as I found it in the early nineties of last century. What struck me, even in its decay and poverty, was the joyousness of that life compared with anything that I had seen in Europe. The people seemed quite independent of our cares of life, our anxious clutching after wealth, our fear of death.’ He found a khoja to teach him more Arabic, and armed with a rapidly increasing fluency took ship for Jaffa, where, to the horror of European residents and missionaries, he donned native garb and disappeared into the depths of the Palestinian hinterland.

Some of his experiences in the twilight of that exotic world may be re-read in his travelogue, *Oriental Encounters*. He had found, as he explains, a world of freedom unimaginable to a public schoolboy raised on an almost idolatrous passion for The State. Most Palestinians never set eyes on a policeman, and lived for decades without engaging with government in any way. Islamic law was administered in its time-honoured fashion, by qadis who, with the exception of

the Sahn and Ayasofya graduates in the cities, were local scholars. Villages chose their own headmen, or inherited them, and the same was true for the bedouin tribes. The population revered and loved the Sultan-Caliph in faraway Istanbul, but understood that it was not his place to interfere with their lives.

It was this freedom, as much as intellectual assent, which set Marmaduke on the long pilgrimage which was to lead him to Islam. He saw the Muslim world before Westernisation had contaminated the lives of the masses, and long before it had infected Muslim political thought and produced the modern vision of the Islamic State, with its 'ideology', its centralised bureaucracy, its secret police, its *Pasdaran* and its *Basij*. That totalitarian nightmare he would not have recognised as Muslim. The deep faith of the Levantine peasantry which so amazed him was sustained by the sincerity that can only come when men are free, not forced, in the practice of religion. For the state to compel compliance is to spread vice and disbelief; as the Arab proverb which he well-knew says: 'If camel-dung were to be prohibited, people would seek it out.'

Throughout his life Pickthall saw Islam as radical freedom, a freedom from the encroachments of the State as much as from the claws of the ego. It also offered freedom from narrow fanaticism and sectarian bigotry. Late Ottoman Palestine was teeming with missionaries of every Christian sect, each convinced, in those pre-ecumenical days, of its own solitary rightness. He was appalled by the hate-filled rivalry of the sects, which, he thought, should at least be united in the land holy to their faith. But Christian Jerusalem was a maze of rival shrines and liturgies, where punches were frequently thrown in churches, while the Jerusalem of Islam was gloriously united under the Dome, the physical crown of the city, and of her complex history.

1897 found him in Damascus, the silent city of lanes, hidden rose-bowers, and walnut trees. It was in this deep peacefulness, resting from his adventures, that he worked methodically through the mysteries of Arabic grammar. He read poetry and history; but seemed drawn, irresistibly, to the Holy Qur'an. Initially led to it by curiosity, he soon came to suspect that he had unearthed the end of the Englishman's eternal religious quest. The link was Thomas Traherne and Gerrard Winstanley, who, with their nature mysticism and insistence on personal freedom from an intrusive state or priesthood, had been his inspiration since his early teens. Now their words seemed to be bearing fruit.

Winstanley is an important key to understanding Pickthall's thought. His 1652 masterpiece, *Law of Freedom on a Platform*, had been the manifesto of the Digger movement, the most radical offshoot of Leveller Protestantism. In this book, which deeply shaped the soul of the young Pickthall, Winstanley outlined what was to become the essence of Christian Socialism. The Diggers believed in the holiness of labour, coming by their name when, in 1649, Winstanley and a group of friends took over a plot of waste land at Walton-on-Thames, planting corn, beans and parsnips. This gesture was, Pickthall realised in Damascus, illegal in Christendom, but was precisely the Shari'a principle of *ihya al-mawat*, gaining entitlement to land by reviving it after its 'death by neglect'. The Diggers were held together, not by cowed obedience to a religious state, but by love among themselves, fired and purified by the dignity of labour.

It soon became clear to Pickthall that their Dissenting theology, which moved far beyond Calvin in its rejection of original sin and orthodox Trinitarian doctrine, and its emphasis on knowing God through closeness to nature, was precisely the message of Islam. This was a religion for

autonomous communities, self-governing under God, each free to elect its own minister.

The God of the Diggers was a god of Reason – not the mechanical dictator whom Blake was to scorn as Urizen, ‘blind ignorance’, but reason as illuminated by God through the practice of the virtues and communion with nature. Superstition and priestcraft were abhorred. The Reason-God was immanent in creation, which, for Winstanley, as for Traherne and the Cambridge Platonists, was a blessed sign of God’s nearness. Winstanley had dipped into the Hermetic wisdom of the age, and, like the Quakers with whom we was for a time associated, absorbed something of the spirit of Islam through the Italian esoterists Ficino, Bruno, and Campanella.

It was not for nothing that the first English rendering of the *Basmala* was made by an enthusiastic Quaker, George Keith, who translated it as ‘In the Name of the Lord the merciful Commiserator.’ Somewhat later, Robert Barclay, the greatest name in English Quaker theology, borrowed extensively from Ibn Tufayl. By all these channels Islam had enriched and uplifted English Dissent.

Another Digger theme which attracted Pickthall was their communitarian optimism. Winstanley had written: ‘In Cobham on the little heath our digging there goes on, And all our friends they live in love, as if they were but one.’

The brotherhood of Muslims which he observed in Syria, the respect between Sunnis and Shi’is, and their indifference to class distinctions in their places of worship, seemed to be the living realisation of the dreams of English radicals at the time of Cromwell’s Commonwealth. This theme of Muslim brotherhood was to be fundamental in Pickthall’s later writing and preaching.

No less important was the Digger rejection of traditional Church exclusivism. Irrespective of creed, they thought, all men were candidates for salvation. Christ's sacrifice indicated, in its orthodox understanding, a meanness unworthy of a loving God, Who can surely accept the repentance of any faithful monotheist, whether or not he had been bathed in the blood of His son.

Oddly, then, Pickthall came home in Damascus. The picaresque adventures of his days in Palestine had given way to a serious spiritual and intellectual quest. Like Henry Stubbe, another Commonwealth dissident, **he saw in Islam the fulfilment of the English dream of a reasonable and just religion, free of superstition and metaphysical mumbo-jumbo, and bearing fruit in a wonderful and joyful fellowship.**

As the *New Statesman* put it in 1930, reviewing his Koranic translation: 'Mr Marmaduke Pickthall was always a great lover of Islam. When he became a Muslim it was regarded less as conversion than as self-discovery.'

If this was his Road to Damascus, why, then, did he hold back? Some have thought that the reason was his concern for the feelings of his aged mother, with her own Christian certainties. This was his later explanation:

**'The man who did not become a Muslim when he was nineteen years old because he was afraid that it would break his mother's heart does not exist, I am sorry to say. The sad fact is that he was anxious to become a Muslim, forgetting all about his mother. It was his Muslim teacher – the Sheykh-ul-Ulema of the great mosque at Damascus – a noble and benign old man, to whom he one day mentioned his desire to become a Muslim, who reminded him of his duty**

**to his mother and forbade him to profess Islam until he had consulted her. ‘No, my son,’ were his words, ‘wait until you are older, and have seen again your native land. You are alone among us as our boys are alone among the Christians. God knows how I should feel if any Christian teacher dealt with a son of mine otherwise than as I now deal with you.’ [...] If he had become a Muslim at that time he would pretty certainly have repented it – quite apart from the unhappiness he would have caused his mother, which would have made him unhappy – because he had not thought and learnt enough about religion to be certain of his faith. It was only the romance and pageant of the East which then attracted him. He became a Muslim in real earnest twenty years after.’**

He left Damascus, then, without Islam. But jobs were beckoning. The British Museum offered him a post on the basis of his knowledge of ancient Welsh and Irish, but he declined. He was offered the vice-consulship at the British consulate in Haifa, but this was withdrawn when it was learnt how young he was. His family, and his patient Muriel, summoned him home, and, penniless, he obeyed.

He travelled back slowly, considering the meaning of his steps. As he left the sun behind him, he seemed to leave courtesy and contentment as well. The Muslims were the happiest people on earth, never complaining even when faced with dire threats. The Christians among them were protected and privileged by the Capitulations. The Ottoman Balkans, under the sultans a place of refuge for victims of church wars, had been cruelly diminished by crusade and insurrection, prompted, in every case, from outside. He saw the Morea, the first land of Greek independence, in which a third of a million Muslims had been slaughtered by priests and peasants. The remaining corners of Ottoman Europe



seemed overshadowed by a similar fate; but still the people smiled. It was the grace of *rida*.

Back in London, Pickthall recalled his romantic duties. He paced the pavement outside Muriel's home in the time-honoured way, and battered down her parents' resistance. They married in September 1896, the groom having fasted the previous day as a mark of respect for what he still considered a sacrament of the Church. Then he bore her swiftly away to Geneva, partly for the skiing, and partly, too, to associate with the literary circles which Pickthall admired.

During his sojourn in the dour Calvinist capital, Pickthall honed the skills which would make him one of the world's most distinguished exponents both of novel-writing, and of the still underdeveloped sport of skiing. He began a novel, and kept a diary, in which, despite his youth, his mature descriptive gift is already evident. He wrote of

‘a pearly mist delicately flushed from the sunset, on lake and mountains. The twin sails of a barque and the hull itself seemed motionless, yet were surely slipping past the piers. There was something remote about the whole scene, or so it appeared to me. I was able to separate myself from the landscape: to stand back, as it were, and admire it as one admires a fine painting. I crossed a bridge: starless night on the one hand: dying day on the other. There was a mist about the city: a mist that glowed with a blue spirit light which burned everywhere or nowhere, out of which the yellow lights looked over their dancing semblance in the water watchfully, as from a citadel. The distance of the streets was inundated with stagnant grey light, from which the last warmth of light had just faded. As I penetrated the city it had no other light than that which the street lamps gave it, and the glow from a lamp-lit window here and there. But the sky was still pale and green, with a softness as of velvet. The

great round globules of electric light, rising up on the bridge against illimitable space, and their lengthened reflections, caught the eye and blinded it.'

But this landscape concealed a *tristesse*, the local mood that Byron had dubbed 'Lemancholy.' By morning, a thick fog

'hung over the city, like a veil on the face of a plain woman, hiding blemishes and defects, softening all hardness of outline, soothing with the suggestion of a non-existent beauty. It is a law of nature, as it is of art, that half-revelation is more attractive than nakedness. Unhappily there is another law which forbids a man to rest content until he has stripped his ideal and beheld it naked. Hence the end of most men's dreams is disappointment. And this disappointment is proportionate to what the world calls success.'

By the shores of Lake Lemman, then, the novelist-in-waiting acquired his love of light, which later became one of the strengths and hallmarks of his mature prose. Here, too, he developed that sense of the fragility, even the unreality, of observed nature, and the superficial nature of man's passage upon it, which enrich his novels, and increased the readiness of his heart for Islam. In all these ways, his writing mirrored the sensitivity of the paintings of his great fellow-converts, Ivan Aguéli, and Etienne Dinet. Aguéli's tableaux have a Sibelian sense of misty timelessness; while Dinet's exuberant Algerian and Meccan paintings recall the Muslim sense that God is present in our daily joys: the utter ubiquity of the *qibla*. Pickthall's novels, at their best, resemble a marriage of the two styles, just as he found in Islamic faith the ideal which he had sought in Christianity: a medieval liturgy combined with a low ecclesiology, the hieratic dignity of Laud invigorated by the social passions of Dissent.

On the surface, however, his religious needs seemed to be satisfied by an increasingly high Anglicanism. He frequently fasted and took communion, and insisted (to the annoyance of his chapelbound in-laws) on the truth of the Apostolic Succession. Behind this, however, his notebooks indicate a robust willingness to accept and face doubts, and even a solid cynicism about the ultimate truth of God; he wrestled with these difficulties, seeking help in the secular philosophy of the day, eventually to emerge, as al-Ghazali had done, a stronger man.

Rare is the secular soul that can produce true literature; and Pickthall's youthful agonies over faith energise the first of his writings to see print: his short stories 'Monsieur le Président' and 'The Word of an Englishman', both published in 1898. The novel he had begun in Switzerland was never published: it is simple juvenilia, a laboratory experiment that in print would have done him no good at all. Sadly, his first published novel, *All Fools*, was little better, and contained morally problematic passages which were to saddle him in later years with the reputation of a libertine. Even his mother was disturbed by the most offending passage in the book, which used the word 'stays', an unmentionable item of Victorian underwear. The Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem, to whom Pickthall unwisely sent a copy, was similarly agitated, and the young novelist lost many friends. Soon he bought up the unsold copies, and had them destroyed.

But by then he had already written much of the novel that was to catapult him to fame as one of the bestselling English novelists of the day: *Said the Fisherman*. This was published by Methuen in 1903, to spectacularly favourable reviews. A blizzard of fan-mail settled on his doormat. One especially pleasant letter came from H.G. Wells, who wrote, 'I wish that I could feel as certain about my own work as I do of yours, that it will be alive and interesting people fifty years from

now.' Academics such as Granville Browne heaped praises upon it for its accurate portrayal of Arab life. In later years, Pickthall acknowledged that the novel's focus on the less attractive aspects of the Arab personality which he had encountered in Palestine could never make the book popular among Arabs themselves; but even after his conversion, he insisted that the novelist's mission was not to propagandise, but to tease out every aspect of the human personality, whether good or bad. As with his great harem novel, *Veiled Women*, he was concerned to be true to his perceptions; he would document English and Oriental life as he found it, not as he or others would wish it to be. The greatness of the Oriental vision would in this way shine through all the brighter.

His next novel returned him to England. *Enid* is the first of his celebrated Suffolk tales, reminiscent in some respects of the writings of the Powys brothers. It was followed by *The House of Islam*, which he wrote while nursing his mother in her final illness, and at a time when his life was saddened by the growing realisation that he would never have children. The novel is unsteady and still immature: still only in his twenties, Pickthall could manage the comic scenes of *Said the Fisherman*, but could not fully sustain the grave, tragic theme which he chose for *The House*, which described the anguish of a Muslim compelled to take his sick daughter to a Western Christian doctor when traditional remedies had failed.

This productive but sober period of his life ended in 1907. An invitation to St James's Palace to meet the wife of Captain Machell, advisor to the Egyptian Prime Minister Mustafa Fahmi Pasha, began with a discussion of his books, and led to an invitation to Alexandria.

Pickthall accepted with alacrity, and soon was back in his beloved East. In native dress again, he travelled through the countryside, marvelling at the *mawlid* of al-Sayyid al-Badawi in Tanta, and immersing himself in Arab ways. The result was a series of short stories and his novel *Children of the Nile*. It also offered an opportunity to help his friend James Hanauer, the Anglican chaplain at Damascus, edit his anthology of Muslim, Christian and Jewish tales, *Folklore of the Holy Land*.

1908 brought intimations of the collapse of the old world. At first, the Young Turk revolution seemed to presage a renewed time of hope for the Empire. Pickthall welcomed the idealistic revolutionaries, imagining that they would hold the empire together better than the old Sultan, with his secretive ways. Here, perhaps, is the essence of his apparent remoteness towards Sheikh Abdullah Quilliam. Quilliam had been a confidant of Abdul Hamid, 'the Sultan's Englishman', his private advisor and his emissary on sensitive missions to the Balkans. Quilliam knew the Sultan as Pickthall never did, and must have felt that his opposition to the Young Turk movement was fully vindicated by the disasters of the Balkan War of 1912, when the Empire lost almost all her remaining European territories to vengeful Christians. More calamitous still was the Unionist decision to cast in its lot with Prussian militarism during the First World War. Pickthall, too, became anxious for Turkey, seeing that the old British policy of upholding the integrity of the Ottoman Empire, which had begun even before Britain intervened on Turkey's side in the Crimean War, and had been reinforced by Disraeli's anti-Russian strategy, was steadily disintegrating in the face of Young Turk enthusiasm for Germany.

Coup and counter-coup let much gifted Osmanli blood. The Arabs and the Balkan Muslims, who had previously looked up to the Turks for political and religious leadership, began

to wonder whether they should not heed the mermaid calls of the European Powers, and press for autonomy or outright independence from the Porte. Behind the agitation was, on the one hand, the traditional British fear that, in the words of Sir Mark Sykes, ‘the collapse of the Ottoman Empire would be a frightful disaster to us.’ On the other were ranged the powers of bloodsucking French banks, Gladstonian Christian Islamophobia, and a vicious pan-Slavism bankrolled from the darker recesses of Moscow’s bureaucracy.

Sheikh Abdullah Quilliam, that undying Empire loyalist, fired off a hot broadside of polemic:

‘List, ye Czar of “Russia’s all,”

Hark! The sound of Freedom’s call,

Chanting in triumphant staves,

“Perish tyrants! Perish knaves!”’

Like Pickthall, he knew that the integrity of the traditional free lands of Islam was threatened not by internal weakness so much as by the Russian system of government, which, as Pickthall saw, ‘must have war. War is a necessity of its existence, for an era of peace would inevitably bring to pass the revolution which has long been brewing.’ The collapse of the Ottoman Empire, he knew, would plunge the region into disorder for an age. He had no confidence in the ability of Arab or Balkan peoples to recreate the free and stable space which the Ottomans, at their best, had supplied, and he lamented the Foreign Office’s change of heart. ‘An independent Turkey,’ he opined, ‘was regarded by our older, better-educated statesmen as just as necessary [...] as a safety-valve is to a steam-engine: do away with it – the thing

explodes.’ Lawrence and his Arab allies would soon demonstrate the truth of his predictions.

Pickthall was never fully at ease with the Unionists. In later years, he must frequently have wondered whether Quilliam’s insistent conservatism, now to be manifested in support for the Liberal party of Old Turks, was not the course of a wiser head. Quilliam had lived behind the scenes at Yildiz Palace, and knew Abdul Hamid as few others had done; and he had trusted, even loved the man. The Young Turks promised a new dawn for Islam, the Caliphate and the entire Muslim world; but their Turanian preoccupations were liable to alienate the very minorities that they claimed to emancipate from the *dhimma* rules. Quilliam had urged the Sultan to allow the Balkan Muslims to retain their arms; the Unionists had disarmed them; and the results were to be seen in the tragic refugee columns that escaped the religious pogroms of 1912 and 1913.

As the dismal news rolled in, it seemed as though Heaven had finally abandoned the Empire to its fate. In England, Pickthall campaigned vigorously on Turkey’s behalf, but could do nothing against the new Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, who was, as Granville Browne commented, ‘russophile, germanophobe, and anti-Islamic.’ He wrote to a Foreign Office official demanding to know whether the new arrangements in the Balkans could be considered to further the cause of peace, and received the following reply: ‘Yes, and I’ll tell you why. It is not generally known. But the Muslim population has been practically wiped out – 240,000 killed in Western Thrace alone – that clears the ground.’

While campaigning for the dying Empire, Pickthall found time for more novels. *Larkmeadow*, another Suffolk tale, appeared in 1911, and in 1913 he produced one of his masterpieces, *Veiled Women*. This follows *Saïd* in its

realistic, often Zola-like depiction of Middle Eastern life, but now there is an undercurrent of polemic. Edwardian imperial convictions about the evils of slavery stood little chance against the charming reality of a Cairo harem, where concubinage was an option desired earnestly by many Circassian girls, whose slave-guardians thanked God for the ease of their lot. Lord Cromer, although generally contemptuous of Egyptian ways, made an exception in the case of slavery, an institution whose Islamic expression he was able grudgingly to respect:

‘It may be doubted (Cromer wrote) whether in the majority of cases the lot of slaves in Egypt is, in its material aspects, harder than, or even as hard as that of many domestic servants in Europe. Indeed, from one point of view, the Eastern slave is in a better position than the Western servant. The latter can be thrown out of employment at any moment. [...] Cases are frequent of masters who would be glad to get rid of their slaves, but who are unable to do so because the latter will not accept the gift of liberty. A moral obligation, which is universally recognised, rests on all masters to support aged and infirm slaves till they die; this obligation is often onerous in the case of those who have inherited slaves from their parents or other relatives.’ (Lord Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, New York, 1908, II, 496-7.)

In its portrayal of the positive aspects of polygamy and slavery, *Veiled Women* was calculated to shock. It was, perhaps for this reason, one of his least popular works.

During the same period Pickthall contributed to the *New Age*, the fashionable literary magazine supported by Bernard Shaw, sharing its pages, almost weekly, with Ezra Pound, D.H. Lawrence, and G.K. Chesterton. As a literary figure, if not as a political advocate, he had arrived.



*Veiled Women* gave him the fare to Istanbul. Lodged with a German lady (Miss Kate, Turkicised to Misket Hanum) in a house in the quiet suburb of Erenköy, he gathered material for his dramatic but sad *With the Turk in Wartime*, and his *The Early Hours*, perhaps the greatest of his novels. He also penned a series of passionate essays, *The Black Crusade*. During this time, despite the Balkan massacres, Christians went unmolested in the great city. He recorded a familiar scene at the Orthodox church in Pera one Easter Friday: 'four different factions fighting which was to carry the big Cross, and the Bishop hitting out right and left upon their craniums with his crozier; many people wounded, women in fits. The Turkish mounted police had to come in force to stop further bloodshed.' It was a perfect image of the classical Ottoman self-understanding: without the Sultan-Caliph, the minorities would murder each other. The Second Balkan War, which saw the victorious Orthodox powers squabbling over the amputated limbs of Turkey, looked like a full vindication of this.

Pickthall returned to an England full of glee at the Christian victories. As a lover of Turkey, he was shattered by the mood of triumph. The Bishop of London held a service of intercession to pray for the victory of the Bulgarian army as it marched on Istanbul. Where, in all this, was Pickthall's high Anglicanism?

It was the English mood of holy war which finally drove him from the faith of his fathers. He had always felt uncomfortable with those English hymns that curse the infidel. One particular source of irritation was Bishop Cleveland Coxe's merry song:

'Trump of the Lord! I hear it blow!

Forward the Cross; the world shall know

Jehovah's arms against the foe;

Down shall the cursed Crescent go!

To arms! To arms!

God wills it so.'

And now, in a small Sussex village church, Pickthall heard a vicar hurling imprecations against the devilish Turk. The last straw was Charles Wesley's hymn 'For the Mahometans':

'O, may thy blood once sprinkled cry

For those who spurn Thy sprinkled blood:

Assert thy glorious Deity

Stretch out thine arm thou triune God

The Unitarian fiend expel

And chase his doctrines back to Hell.'

- Pickthall thought of the Carnegie Report, which declared, of the Greek attack on Valona, that 'in a century of repentance they could not expiate it.'
- He thought of the forced conversions of the Pomaks in Bulgaria.
- He remembered the refugees in Istanbul, their lips removed as trophies by Christian soldiers.
- He remembered that no Muslim would ever sing a hymn against Jesus.

He could stand no more. He left the church before the end of the service, and never again considered himself a Christian.

The political situation continued to worsen. Horrified by the new British policy, which seemed hell-bent on plunging the Balkans and the Middle East into chaos, the Young Turks strengthened their ties with Berlin. Meanwhile, the British government, driven by the same men who had allowed the destruction of Macedonia and Thrace, marched headlong towards war with the Central Powers.

In August 1914, Winston Churchill seized two Turkish dreadnoughts, the *Sultan Osman* and the *Reshadiye*, which were under construction in a British yard. The outrage in Turkey was intense. Millions of pounds had been subscribed by ordinary Turks: women had even sold their hair for a few coppers and schoolboys made do with dry bread in order to add to the fund. But the ships were gone, and with them went Pickthall's last hopes for a peaceful settlement. The hubris of nationalistic Europe, the tribal vanity which she pressed on the rest of the world as the sole path to human progress, was about to send millions of young men to their deaths. The trigger was the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand by a Serbian nationalist, on the streets of Sarajevo.

The war had broken Europe's ideals, and the machines of Krupp lent new efficiency to her patriotic hatreds. The Hun reached the Marne, and English dowagers strangled their dachshunds with their own hands. It was no time to be a Turcophile. But Pickthall had found a new source of strength. The pride of human autonomy had been shown a lethal fantasy; and only God could provide succour. But where could He be found?

In 1913, Lady Evelyn Cobbold, the Sutherland heiress and traveller, tried to convert him during a dinner at Claridges, explaining that the waiters would do perfectly well as witnesses. He politely demurred; but he could marshal no argument against hers. What he had seen and described, she had lived. As an English Muslim woman familiar with the heart of Asia, she knew that his love for Islam was grounded in much more than a Pierre Loti style enjoyment of exotica. And so, on 29 November 1914, during a lecture on 'Islam and Progress', he took the plunge, joining countless others of his kind. From now on, his life would be lived in the light of the One God of Islam. Muriel followed him soon afterwards.

The war ground on, and Pickthall watched as the Turks trounced the assembled British and colonial troops at Gallipoli, only to be betrayed by the Arab uprising under Lawrence. Like Evelyn Cobbold, Pickthall despised Lawrence as a shallow romantic, given to unnatural passions and wild misjudgements. As he later wrote, reviewing the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*:

'He really thought the Arabs a more virile people than the Turks. He really thought them better qualified to govern. He really believed that the British Government would fulfil punctually all the promises made on its behalf. He really thought that it was love of freedom and his personal effort and example rather than the huge sums paid by the British authorities and the idea of looting Damascus, which made the Arabs zealous in rebellion.'

While Europeans bloodied each others' noses, and encouraged the same behaviour in others, Pickthall began to define his position in the British Muslim community. The Liverpool congregation had lost its mosque in 1908, and Sheikh Abdullah had gone to ground in the Turkish town of Bostancik, to return as the mysterious Dr Henri Marcel Leon,

translator of Mevlevi *ghazals* and author of a work on influenza. There was a prayer-room in Notting Hill, and an Islam Society, a Muslim Literary Society, and also the eccentric Anglo-Moghul mosque in Woking. In all these institutions Pickthall assumed the role of a natural leader. He had no patience with the Qadiani sect ('I call myself a Sunni Muslim of the Hanafi school', he said in self-definition), but when Khwaja Kamaluddin, suspected by many even then of Qadiani sympathies, returned to India in 1919, Pickthall preached the Friday sermons in Woking. 'If there is one thing that turns your hair grey, it is preaching in Arabic', he later remarked, perhaps recalling the caliph Umar II's words that 'mounting the pulpits, and fear of solecisms, have turned my hair grey.' He preached in London as well, and in due course some of his *khutbas* found their way into print, drawing the attention of others in the Muslim world. In addition, he spent a year running an Islamic Information Bureau in Palace Street, London, which issued a weekly paper, *The Muslim Outlook*.

The *Outlook* was funded by Indian Muslims loyal to the Caliphate. The Khilafatist movement represented a dire threat to British rule in India, which had previously found the Muslims to be less inclined to the independence party than the Hindus. But the government's policy was too much to bear. On January 18, 1918, Lloyd George had promised Istanbul and the Turkish-speaking areas of Thrace to post-war Turkey; but the reality turned out rather differently. Istanbul was placed under Allied occupation, and the bulk of Muslim Thrace was awarded to Greece. This latest case of Albion's perfidy intensified Indian Muslim mistrust of British rule. Gandhi, too, encouraged many Hindus to support the Khilafat movement, and few Indians participated in the Raj's official celebration of the end of the First World War. Instead, a million telegrams of complaint arrived at the Viceroy's residence.

Pickthall was now at his most passionate:

‘Objectivity is much more common in the East than in the West; nations, like individuals, are there judged by their words, not by their own idea of their intentions or beliefs; and these inconsistencies, which no doubt look very trifling to a British politician, impress the Oriental as a foul injustice and the outcome of fanaticism. The East preserves our record, and reviews it as a whole. There is no end visible to the absurdities into which this mental deficiency of our rulers may lead us. [...] Nothing is too extravagant to be believed in this connection, when flustered mediocrities are in the place of genius.’

This bitter alienation from British policy, which now placed him at the opposite pole from his erstwhile friend Churchill, opened the next chapter in Pickthall’s life. Passionate Khilafatists invited him to become editor of a great Indian newspaper, the *Bombay Chronicle*, and he accepted. In September 1919 he reached the Apollo Bunder, and immediately found himself carried away in the maelstrom of Indian life and politics. When he arrived, most of the *Chronicle*’s staff were on strike; within six months he had turned it around and doubled its circulation, through a judicious but firm advocacy of Indian evolution towards independence. The Government was incandescent, but could do little. However Pickthall, who became a close associate of Gandhi, supported the ulema’s rejection of violent resistance to British rule, and their opposition to the growing migration of Indian Muslims to independent Afghanistan. Non-violence and non-co-operation seemed the most promising means by which India would emerge as a strong and free nation. When the Muslim League made its appearance under the very secular figure of Jinnah, Pickthall joined the great bulk of India’s ulema in rejecting the idea of partition. India’s great Muslim millions were one family, and must never be

divided. Only together could they complete the millennial work of converting the whole country to Islam.

So the Englishman became an Indian nationalist leader, fluent in Urdu, and attending dawn prayers in the mosque, dressed in Gandhian homespun adorned with the purple crescent of the Khilafatists. He wrote to a friend: 'They expect me to be a sort of political leader as well as a newspaper editor. I have grown quite used to haranguing multitudes of anything from 5 to 30,000 people in the open air, although I hate it still as much as ever and inwardly am just as miserably shy.' He also continued his Friday sermons, preaching at the great mosque of Bijapur and elsewhere.

In 1924, the Raj authorities found the *Chronicle* guilty of misreporting an incident in which Indian protesters had been killed. Crushing fines were imposed on the newspaper, and Pickthall resigned. His beloved Khilafatist movement folded in the same year, following Atatürk's abolition of the ancient title. Although he effectively left political life, he was always remembered gratefully by Gandhi, who was later to write these words to his widow:

'Your husband and I met often enough to grow to love each other and I found Mr. Pickthall a most amiable and deeply religious man. And although he was a convert he had nothing of the fanatic in him that most converts, no matter to what faith they are converted, betray in their speech and act. Mr. Pickthall seemed to me to live his faith unobtrusively.'

His job was gone, but Pickthall's desire to serve Islam burned brighter than ever. He accepted the headmastership of a boy's school in the domains of the Nizam of Hyderabad, outside the authority of British India. This princely state boasted a long association with British Muslims, and had been many years earlier the home of one of the most

colourful characters in India: William Linnaeus Gardner (1770-1835), a convert who fought in the Nizam's forces against the French in 1798 before setting up his own regiment of irregulars, Gardner's Horse, and marrying his son to a niece of the Moghul emperor Akbar Shah.

In the 1920s, Hyderabad resembled a surviving fragment of Moghul brilliance, and the Nizam, the richest man in the world, was busy turning his capital into an oasis of culture and art. The appointment of the celebrated Pickthall would add a further jewel to his crown. Pickthall's monarchist sympathies were aroused by the Nizam, who had made his lands the pride of India. 'He lives like a dervish', Pickthall reported, 'and devotes his time to every detail of the Government.' It was his enthusiasm and generosity that enabled Pickthall to launch the journal *Islamic Culture*, which he edited for ten years, and which continues to be published in the city as one of the Muslim world's leading academic journals. Under his editorship, a wide range of Muslim and non-Muslim scholars published on a huge variety of topics. A regular contributor was Josef Horowitz, the great German orientalist. Another was Henri Leon, now writing as Harun Mustafa Leon, who contributed learned articles on early Arabic poetry and rhetoric, on Abbasid medical institutions, and a piece on 'The Languages of Afghanistan.'

Pickthall also directed the school for Hyderabad civil servants, encouraging their attendance at prayer, and teaching them the protocols to observe when moving among the burra sahibs of British India. Prayer featured largely in all his activities: as he wrote to a friend, after attending a conference on education:

'I attended prayers at Tellycherry. The masjids are all built like Hindu temples. There are no minarets, and the azan is



called from the ground, as the Wahhabis call it. When I mentioned this fact, the reforming party were much amused because the maulvis of Malabar are very far from being Wahhabis. I stopped the Conference proceedings at each hour of prayer, and everyone went to the adjacent mosque. I impressed upon the young leaders the necessity of being particularly strict in observance of the essential discipline of Islam.'

In the midst of this educational activity, he managed to find time to write. He wrote a (never to be published) Moghul novel, *Dust and the Peacock Throne*, in 1926, and the following year he composed his Madras lectures, published as *The Cultural Side of Islam*, which are still widely read in the Subcontinent.

But from 1929 until 1931 the Nizam gave him leave-of-absence to enable him to complete his Koranic translation. As he noted: 'All Muslim India seems to be possessed with the idea that I ought to translate the Qur'an into real English.' He was anxious that this should be the most accurate, as well as the most literate, version of the Scripture. As well as mastering the classical Islamic sources, he travelled to Germany to consult with leading Orientalists, and studied the groundbreaking work of Nöldeke and Schwally, the *Geschichte des Qorans*, to which his notes frequently refer.

When the work was completed, Pickthall realised that it was unlikely to gain wide acceptance among Muslims unless approved by Al-Azhar, which, with the abolition of the Ottoman post of Shaykh al-Islam, had become the leading religious authority in the Muslim world. So to Egypt he went, only to discover

- that powerful sections of the ulema considered unlawful any attempt to render ‘the meanings of the Book’ into a language other than Arabic.
- The controversy soon broke, as Shaykh Muhammad Shakir wrote in the newspaper *Al-Ahram* that all who aided such a project would burn in Hell for evermore.
- The Shaykh recommended that Pickthall translate Tabari’s commentary instead, a work that would amount to at least one hundred volumes in English.
- Other ulema demanded that his translation be retranslated into Arabic, to see if it differed from the original in any respect, however small.

Pickthall published, in *Islamic Culture*, a long account of his battle with the Shaykh and the mentality which he represented. He included this reflection:

‘Many Egyptian Muslims were as surprised as I was

- at the extraordinary ignorance of present world conditions of men who claimed to be the thinking heads of the Islamic world – men who think
- that the Arabs are still ‘the patrons,’ and the non-Arabs their ‘freedmen’;
- who cannot see that the positions have become reversed,
- that the Arabs are no longer the fighters and the non-Arabs the stay-at-homes
- but it is the non-Arabs who at present bear the brunt of the Jihâd;
- that the problems of the non-Arabs are not identical with those of the Arabs;
- that translation of the Qur’ân is for the non-Arabs a necessity, which, of course, it is not for Arabs;

- men who cannot conceive that there are Muslims in India as learned and devout, as capable as judgment and as careful for the safety of Islam, as any to be found in Egypt.’\*

Note:\* I have observed this prejudice deeply rooted among Arabic-speaking people against Muslim ‘Ulema of non-Arab countries even in 2012—Muhammad Umar Chand

The battle was won when Pickthall addressed, in Arabic, a large gathering of the ulema, including Rashid Rida, explaining the current situation of Islam in the world, and the enormous possibilities for the spread of Islam among the English-speaking people. He won the argument entirely. The wiser heads of al-Azhar, recognising their inability to understand the situation of English speakers and the subtle urgencies of *da‘wa*, accepted his translation. The former Shaykh al-Azhar, *al-Maraghi*, who could see his sincerity and his erudition, offered him these parting words: ‘If you feel so strongly convinced that you are right, go on in God’s name in the way that is clear to you, and pay no heed to what any of us say.’

The translation duly appeared, in 1930, and was hailed by the *Times Literary Supplement* as ‘a great literary achievement.’ Avoiding both the Jacobean archaisms of Sale, and the baroque flourishes and expansions of Yusuf Ali (whose translation Pickthall regarded as too free), it was recognised as the best translation ever of the Book, and, indeed, as a monument in the history of translation. Unusually for a translation, it was further translated into several other languages, including Tagalog, Turkish and Portuguese.

Pickthall, now a revered religious leader in his own right, was often asked for Hanafi fatwas on difficult issues, and continued to preach. As such, he was asked by the Nizam to arrange the marriage of the heir to his throne to **the daughter of the last Ottoman caliph, Princess Dürrüşehvar. The Ottoman exiles lived in France as pensioners of the Nizam,** and thither Pickthall and the Hyderabad suite travelled. His knowledge of Ottoman and Moghul protocol allowed Pickthall to bring off this brilliant match, which was to be followed by an *umra* visit, his private hope being that the Caliphate, which he regarded as still by right vested in the House of Osman, might now pass to a Hyderabad prince yet to be born, who would use the wealth of India and the prestige and holiness of the Caliphate to initiate a new dawn of independence and success for Islam. Delhi's decision to absorb the Nizam's domains into independent India made that impossible; but the princess devoted her life to good works, which continue today, even after her ninetieth birthday, which she celebrated in January 2004.

In 1935 Pickthall left Hyderabad. His school was flourishing, and he had forever to deny that he was the Fielding of E.M. Forster's novel *A Passage to India*. (He knew Forster well, and the charge may not be without foundation.) He handed over *Islamic Culture* to the new editor, the Galician convert Muhammad Asad. He then returned to England, where he set up a new society for Islamic work, and delivered a series of lectures.

Despite this new activity, however, his health was failing, and he must have felt as Winstanley felt:

‘And here I end, having put my arm as far as my strength will go to advance righteousness. I have writ, I have acted, I have peace: and now I must wait to see the Spirit do his own work in the hearts of others and whether England shall be the first

land, or some other, wherein truth shall sit down in triumph.’ (Gerrard Winstanley, *A New Year’s Gift for the Parliament and Army*, 1650.)

He died in a cottage in the West Country on May 19 1936, of coronary thrombosis, and was laid to rest in the Muslim cemetery at Brookwood. After his death, his wife cleared his desk, where he had been revising his Madras lectures the night before he died, and she found that the last lines he had written were from the Qur’an:

‘Whosoever surrendereth his purpose to Allah, while doing good, his reward is with his Lord, and there shall no fear come upon them, neither shall they grieve.’

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anne Jackson Fremantle, *Loyal Enemy*. London: Hutchinson, 1938.
- William Dalrymple, *White Moghuls: Love and Betrayal in 18<sup>th</sup> century India*. London: Viking, 2003.
- Peter Clark, *Marmaduke Pickthall: British Muslim*, London: Quartet, 1986.
- Peter Clark, ‘A man of two cities: Pickthall, Damascus, Hyderabad.’ *Asian Affairs* 25/iii (1994), 281-292.
- Marmaduke Pickthall, ‘In Memory of British Statesmanship’, *The Muslim Outlook*, Jan 22, 1920, pp.3-4.
- Marmaduke Pickthall, ‘Muslim Education’, *Islamic Culture* 1 (1927), 100-9.

- Marmaduke Pickthall, 'Mr Yusuf Ali's Translation of the Qur'an', *Islamic Culture* IX (1935), 519-21.
- Marmaduke Pickthall, 'Letters from Turkey,' *Islamic Culture* XI (1937), 419-32.
- E.E. Speight, "Marmaduke Pickthall", *Islamic Culture* X (July 1936), iii-vi.
- Muriel Pickthall, 'A Great English Muslim.' *Islamic Culture* XI (1937), 138-42.
- Omar Khalidi, 'The Caliph's Daughter', *Cornucopia* 31 (2004), 34-38.
- Earl of Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, New York: Macmillan 1908.
- Andrew Bradstock (ed.), *Winstanley and the Diggers*. London: Frank Cass, 2000.
- Nabil Matar, *Islam in Britain 1558-1685*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

---

www.masud.co.uk | British Muslim H

[http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/bmh/BMM-AHM-pickthall\\_bio.htm](http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/bmh/BMM-AHM-pickthall_bio.htm)

A passage from Wikipedia on Pickthall's response to the Armenian issue that the Armenians and their supporters bring up every day even in 2012:

When a propaganda campaign was launched in the UK in 1915 over the massacres of Armenians, Pickthall rose to

challenge it and argued that all the blame could not be placed on the Turkish government. At a time when many Indian Muslims in London had been co-opted by the Foreign Office to provide propaganda services in support of Britain's war against Turkey, Pickthall's stand was considered<sup>[citation needed]</sup> courageous given the war climate. When British Muslims were asked to decide whether they were loyal to the Allies (Britain and France) or the Central Powers (Germany and Turkey), Pickthall said he was ready to be a combatant for his country so long as he did not have to fight the Turks. He was conscripted in the last months of the war and became corporal in charge of an influenza isolation hospital. The Foreign Office would have dearly liked to have used his talents as a linguist, but instead decided to regard him as a security risk.<sup>[4]</sup>

(2)

## Marmaduke Pickthall

---

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia



This article **needs additional citations for verification**. Please help improve this article by adding citations to **reliable sources**. Unsourced material may

bechallenged and removed. (April 2009)

## Marmaduke Pickthall



<b>Born</b>	Marmaduke William Pickthall 7 April 1876 <a href="#">Harrow, London</a>
<b>Died</b>	Porthminster Hotel, <a href="#">St Ives, Cornwall</a>
<b>Occupation</b>	<a href="#">Islamic scholar</a>

**(Mohammed) Marmaduke Pickthall** (7 April 1875 – 19 May 1936) was a Western [Islamic scholar](#), noted for his [English](#) translation of the [Qur'an](#). A convert from [Christianity](#), Pickthall was a novelist, esteemed by [D. H. Lawrence](#), [H. G. Wells](#), and [E. M. Forster](#), as well as a journalist, headmaster, and political and religious [leader](#). He declared his Islam in dramatic fashion after delivering a talk



on 'Islam and Progress' on November 29, 1917, to the [Muslim Literary Society](#) in [Notting Hill](#), West London. He was also involved with the services of the [Woking Muslim Mission](#) in the absence of [Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din](#), its founder.<sup>[1]</sup>

**Contents**

[\[hide\]](#)

[1 Biography](#)

[2 See also](#)

[3 References](#)

[4 Further reading](#)

[5 External links](#)

[\[edit\]](#)Biography

---

Marmaduke Pickthall was born in 1875 to Mary O'Brien and the Reverend Charles Grayson Pickthall, a comfortable middle class English family, whose roots trace back to a knight of [William the Conqueror](#). He was born near Woodbridge in Suffolk, as his father, Charles, was an Anglican Parson in this region.<sup>[2]</sup> On the death of his father, when Marmaduke was five, the family moved to London. He was a shy and sickly child, suffering from bronchitis. He attended [Harrow School](#) but left after just six terms.<sup>[3]</sup>

Pickthall travelled across many Eastern countries, gaining reputation as a Middle-Eastern scholar. A strong advocate of

the Ottoman Empire even prior to declaring his faith as a Muslim, Pickthall studied the Orient, and published articles and novels on the subject, e.g. *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*. While under the service of the Nizam of Hyderabad, Pickthall published his translation of the Qur'an, authorized by the Al-Azhar University and referred to by the *Times Literary Supplement* as "a great literary achievement."

When a propaganda campaign was launched in the UK in 1915 over the massacres of Armenians, Pickthall rose to challenge it and argued that all the blame could not be placed on the Turkish government. At a time when many Indian Muslims in London had been co-opted by the Foreign Office to provide propaganda services in support of Britain's war against Turkey, Pickthall's stand was considered<sup>[citation needed]</sup> courageous given the war climate. When British Muslims were asked to decide whether they were loyal to the Allies (Britain and France) or the Central Powers (Germany and Turkey), Pickthall said he was ready to be a combatant for his country so long as he did not have to fight the Turks. He was conscripted in the last months of the war and became corporal in charge of an influenza isolation hospital. The Foreign Office would have dearly liked to have used his talents as a linguist, but instead decided to regard him as a security risk.<sup>[4]</sup>

In 1920 he went to India with his wife to serve as editor of the Bombay Chronicle, returning to England only in 1935, a year before his death at St Ives, Cornwall. It was in India that

he completed his famous translation, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*.

Pickthall was buried in the Muslim cemetery at [Brookwood](#) in Surrey, England, where [Abdullah Yusuf Ali](#) was later buried.

[\[edit\]](#)See also

---



Wikisource has original text related to this article:

**Marmaduke Pickthall**

- [Abdullah Yusuf Ali](#)
- [Ali Ünal](#)
- [Ahmed Raza Khan](#)
- [Rowland Allanson-Winn, 5th Baron Headley](#)
- [Henry Stanley, 3rd Baron Stanley of Alderley](#)
- [Sir Charles Edward Archibald Watkin Hamilton, 5th Baronet](#)
- [William Abdullah Quilliam](#)
- [Timothy Winter](#)
- [Faris Glubb](#)
- [Ahmad Thomson](#)
- [Islam in the United Kingdom](#)

[\[edit\]](#)References

---

1. <sup>^</sup> <http://www.wokingmuslim.org/pers/pickthall/woking.htm>

2. <sup>^</sup> [http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/bmh/BMM-AHM-pickthall\\_bio.htm](http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/bmh/BMM-AHM-pickthall_bio.htm)
3. <sup>^</sup> <http://www.thetruecall.com/home/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=183>
4. <sup>^</sup> [www.islamispeace.org.uk](http://www.islamispeace.org.uk)

[[edit](#)]Further reading

---

- Obituary in *The Times*, Wednesday 20 May 1936, Page 18, Issue 47379.

[[edit](#)]External links

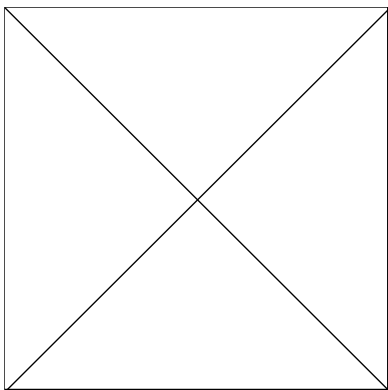
---

- [Online Quran Project](#) includes the [Qur'an](#) translation by Marmaduke Pickthall.
- [Web based Quran Search application](#) Based on the translation from Marmaduke Pickthall.
- [A biography of Marmaduke William Pickthall](#)
- [The English translation of the Qur'an by Marmaduke William Pickthall](#)
- [Works by Marmaduke Pickthall](#) at [Project Gutenberg](#)
- [Pickthall, the Woking Muslim Mission, and his views about Lahore Ahmadiyya leaders](#)
- [ODNB](#) article by Mohammad Shaheen, 'Pickthall, Marmaduke William (1875–1936)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2007 [accessed 21 Oct 2010](#)

- Complete Marmaduke Pickthall translation including arabic, transliteration, audio recital and translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali and Mohammed Habib Shakir
- Search across Marmaduke Pickthall translation and across other translations by Abdullah Yusuf Ali and Mohammed Habib Shakir

(3)

## On Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall



**Shoutbox**

**Yesterday** at 10:06:13 pm  
100%RealMusliman

**Muslim Villa > Forum > Category 6 > VA  
Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall**

Pages: [1] **Go Down**

: LOL tsk tsk  
 July 28, 2012,  
 08:32:52  
 pmRuhi\_Rose: lol ,,  
 apparently these guys  
 have somethin to hide  
 otherwise no reason to  
 bypass the gb intro.  
 July 28, 2012,  
 08:30:20 pm Zeynab:  
 Guests continuing to  
 register without  
 introducing themselves  
 substantially in our  
 guestbook, please read  
 what's mentioned on  
 top of our homepage.  
 Your registration won't  
 be approved if you  
 sign-in without  
 guestbook intro.  
 July 25, 2012,  
 06:20:04  
 pm100%RealMusliman  
 : Insha'Allah you have  
 a great Ramadan  
 aswell.  
 July 25, 2012,  
 06:19:43  
 pm100%RealMusliman  
 : Thank you sista Rose  
 (=

July 22, 2012,



Author

Topic: On Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall (Re

0 Members and 1 Guest are viewing this top

## Zeynab

Founder

Admin

Hero Member



Administrator

Rating: 41

☐ Offline

Posts: 3737

Visiting the  
 'memory lane'  
 is blissful and  
 free.



## On Muhammad

« on: June 03, 2008

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

*My favorite translator, the  
 only reliable one who's wor*

*Pickthall's biography is inte  
 for those who desire to lea  
 This love grew in Pickthall  
 of his insight.*

*Giving every detail of Pick  
 abridged with the relevant  
 the English translation of t  
 Egyptian scholars.*

Marmaduke Pickthall was b

In 1913, Lady Evelyn Cobbo  
 Islam during a dinner at Cla  
 witnesses. He politely dem  
 had seen and described, sh

12:19:50  
amRuhi\_Rose: Ok ,,  
InshAllah, hope u have  
a nice Ramadan br.  
Aram. Btw, check that  
post "uptil what time  
can one eat sahoor." u  
will observe that  
interpolations by the  
mainstream have again  
introduced some  
changes that don't  
conform with the  
Quran.

July 21, 2012,

07:30:34

am100%RealMusliman  
: Fajr time baby! Let's  
get it in (=

July 21, 2012,

02:48:19

am100%RealMusliman  
: Thank you sista Heba  
and sista Zainab (= I  
picked up a ramadan  
prayer calender at the  
masjid earlier today.  
View Shout History

of Asia, she knew that his L  
1914, during a lecture on ‘  
others of his kind. From no  
of Islam. His loving wife, M

Pickthall had travelled wid  
learning foreign languages  
politics of the then Muslim  
Pickthall also spent many y  
services to the Muslims of I

As he noted: "All Muslim In  
the Qur'an into real English  
well as the most literate, v  
Islamic sources, he travelle  
the groundbreaking work o  
notes frequently refer.

When the work was comple  
acceptance among Muslims  
Ottoman post of Shaykh al-  
world. So to Egypt he went  
considered unlawful any at  
other than Arabic. The con  
newspaper Al-Ahram that "  
recommended that Picktha  
amount to at least one hun  
translation be retranslated  
respect, however small.

Pickthall published, in Islar

the mentality which he rep

### Quote

Many Egyptian Muslims were world conditions of men who think that the Arabs cannot see that the position of the fighters and the non-Arabs; that the brunt of the Jihâd; that the Arabs; that translation course, it is not for Arabs; learned and devout, as capable to be found in Egypt.

### Unquote

The battle was won when F including Rashid Rida, explored enormous possibilities for the argument entirely. The understand the situation of his translation. The former erudition, offered him the right, go on in God's name us say."

The translation duly appeared as 'a great literary achievement baroque flourishes and expanded free), it was recognised as a monument in the history of translated into several other



One of Pickthall's most outstanding achievements was his translation of the Quran, which never made him conceited.

### Quote

... The Qur'an cannot be translated. Every effort has been made to render the Qur'an, that inimitable symbol of ecstasy. It is only an attempt to catch something of the charm in which it is meant to do so... [Mar

### Unquote

This quote of Pickhall is one of the infinite beauty of the Glorious

In 1935, Pickthall left Hyderabad to work for the society for Islamic work, and although he was, however, his health was failing.

He died in a cottage in the city of Hyderabad, and was laid to rest in the Muslim cemetery. He was found at his desk, where he had been resting, and he found that the last lines he

"Nay, but whosoever surrenders himself to his Lord, and there shall be a reward for him (2:112)

Original from where the ab



"Say: Though the sea became in  
words of my Lord were exhaust

**persian\_thinker**

technology nerd /  
website team.

Hero Member



Rating: 20

☐ Offline

Posts: 1568



**Re: On Marm  
the Quraan**

« Reply #1 on:

What an interesting  
this dedicated an  
Pickthall was one  
his own understand  
was throughout a  
Whatever question  
the Quran on his  
learnt Arabic on  
enabled him to pr  
Quran. This bro  
Quran and Islam  
Islam, spreading  
profession. Ano  
despite the oppos  
a perfect balance

primary reason for his lack of rationality while he was alive. At the last bit in his life, when he passed away he was left behind those beautiful words in English.

May Allah (The Most Gracious) place him in Paradise.

It's also good to know that his lifetime. Many personalities are most.



*HE WHO KNEELS BEFORE  
STAND BEFORE ANYONE*

### Ruhi\_Rose

Member of the  
website team.  
Hero Member



Rating: 16

☐ Offline

 **Re: On Marmar**  
**the Quraan**

« **Reply #2 on:** J

Yes, it's a wonderful  
depths, but whatever  
admiration for him.

Posts: 2340



Mom of two cute  
rascals

from the Quran, that  
history because he c  
organizations and pe  
balanced thinking an  
Jannah, ameen.

*If you cannot accomplish your*



**100%RealMusliman**

It's ME! Aram Kennard

Full Member



Rating: 6



**Re: On I**

« **Reply #**

You can scop

Pickthall's bio

☐ Offline

Posts: 132



As Real as it gets.

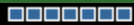
So real, kinda s

**Zeynab**

Founder

Admin

Hero Member



**Administrator**

Rating: 41

☐ Offline

Posts: 3737



Visiting the  
'memory lane' is  
blissful and free.



**Re: On Muham**

« **Reply #4 on:** Ju

Yes, very correct. Marm  
the proudest designation  
a wonderful spot in Parac



"Say: Though the sea became  
words of my Lord were exha



Learn the signs at autism

[Click here](#)

Pages: [1] [Go Up](#)

## own story of opposition he faced from *Ulan* for translating the Quran

***Introductory Note:*** In the biography of Marmaduke Pickthall, entitled *Loyal Enemy* by Anne Fremantle (Hutchinson and Co., London 1938), there is included a lengthy account by Pickthall of his visit to Egypt in connection with revising his English translation of the Quran before publication. The biographer introduces this account as follows:

---

His own account of the difficulties of revising his translation “with the help of Arabic and English knowing men and under the guidance of more learned men who know no English,” is so much the best, that I give it in full:

it was written in Cairo when he was still seething from all the vexations he had undergone.

---

That account is reproduced below.

**By Marmaduke Pickthall**

On the 10th of November 1929 I landed in Egypt, carrying with me in my luggage the typescript of a complete translation of the Quran upon which I had been at work at intervals for several years, and which His Exalted Highness the Nizam had generously granted me the leisure and the means to finish. It was my object to submit it to the Ulama of Egypt and revise the whole work under their direction, that there might be no avoidable mistakes and no unorthodoxy. I had with me a letter of introduction to the Sheykh Mustafa Al-Maraghi, who had been the Rector of Al-Azhar when the letter was written, but had just resigned that highly remunerative post. I had written months before to an old acquaintance in Egypt who had risen to be Prime Minister, asking him to help me in my errand, but had had no answer; so that my whole dependence was upon the said letter of introduction and the reassuring fact that my good friend Fuad Bey Selim al-Higazi was in Alexandria and had promised, when we met some months before in Paris, to help me to the utmost of his power. I had heard that a former English translation by a Muslim had been publicly burnt in the courtyard of the Mosque Al-Azhar, and was forbidden entry into Egypt; but had supposed that it was because it was considered to have some flavour of

heresy. [\[See Note 1\]](#) It was from Faud Bey, who, as soon as he heard of our arrival, came and bore us out to Ramleh to spend a week in a delightful garden by the sea, that I learnt that all translation of the Quran, however faithful, was held to be unlawful by a powerful section of the Ulama. Our friend, however, had been sounding people, in anticipation of my coming, and had found that an equally — possibly more — powerful section of the Ulama held an opposite opinion, among these being the Sheykh Mustafa Al-Maraghi to whom he was glad to hear that I carried an introduction from Lord Lloyd.

We all went up together to Cairo, where Faud Bey had found for us a quiet *pension* in the neighbourhood of Qasr-en-Nil; and two days after our arrival, I was driven out to Helwan through the long avenue beside the Nile, to visit the Sheykh Al-Maraghi. The clean, white, modern town, close to the loam-coloured desert hills, consists entirely of hotels and villas. To one of the latter the Sheykh Al-Maraghi had retired when he resigned, for conscience' sake, the enormously rich post of Rector of Al-Azhar University.

The Sheykh, a tall and very upright man, still in the prime of life, was dressed in the neat turban and long billowing robe of Egyptian Ulama. He wore a scarf round his neck, raised higher on one side than on the other. This, I learnt afterwards, was to hide a sad disfigurement. At the time when he was Judge of the Cairo Muslim Court, he upheld the right of some orphans to a certain property. In revenge, vitriol was thrown at him. Happily it missed his face, but one side of his neck and chest was terribly disfigured. As



Fuad Bey said afterwards: "I do not usually kiss the hands of Ulama, but I kiss that man's hand."

The Sheykh received us very kindly, gave us tea, and took us out on his veranda looking towards the desert hills. Fuad Bey and Ismail Bey Shirin, Deputy-Governor of Cairo, who had come with me, discussed my future programme with our host, who told us that, while he had been Rector of Al-Azhar, the then Prime Minister had spoken to him about my translation, and he had been willing to appoint a committee of the university to revise it with me, but the step had been forbidden by the King, who had somehow been impressed with the idea that translation of the Quran was sinful. It was, therefore, useless to approach Al-Azhar officially as all the patronage in that institution was the King's, but he thought that we could easily find three or four Azharis employed in the secular university — he gave some names to Fuad Bey — willing to do the revision under his guidance. He regretted that he himself knew no English, and so could not appreciate the work. If there were any words or passages which baffled me I was to write them out for him and state the nature of my difficulty, when he would write his explanation or opinion for me. We drove back to Cairo, thinking all was settled. But when we met three of the gentlemen whom the Sheykh had named to us at the house of Lutfi Bey As-Sayyid, head of the secular university, the whole plan suddenly collapsed. Lutfi Bey had invited the head of the Arabic faculty in the university, the blind professor Ta Ha Huseyn, to be present at our conference, and he happened to remark that the three gentlemen ran the risk of losing their posts through helping me, since they belonged to the Al-Azhar and His Majesty

was opposed to all translation of the Quran. Everyone agreed that he was right. I felt bitterly disappointed and, when Ta Ha Husyen suggested that I should approach the King in person, who, he believed, might be induced to change his standpoint, I said that I had not come to Egypt to seek royal sanction for my work, I had already got the sanction of His Exalted highness; nor had I come to seek a *fetwa* from the Ulama of Egypt, we had perfectly competent Ulama in India; I had come to seek the help of Arab learned men on points of Arabic. I talked of leaving Egypt then, and going to Damascus, but Fuad Bey assured me he would find a way out of the impasse; and in fact, soon afterwards, I was introduced to Muhammad Bey Ahmed Al-Ghamrawi, Lecturer in Chemistry at the Cairo College of Medicine, a graduate of London University and a close student of the Quran, with whom I worked at the revision happily for some three months, with an occasional visit from Fuad Bey, and an occasional reference to the Sheykh Al-Maraghi at Helwan.

We led a very quiet life; only once in the month of December did I go out to a dinner party; and then, as luck would have it, I sat next to the most enterprising of Egyptian Muslim journalists. Next day, in *Al-Ahram*, appeared a notice of me and my work under the heading: "A Translation of the Quran." Two days later in the same newspaper and under the same heading appeared two columns of denunciation of translation and the translation of the sacred Book from the pen of Sheykh Muhammad Shakir, a retired professor of Al-Azhar, who (as I learnt) had been leader of the hue-and-cry against Muhammad Ali's translation. The translator and all

who read his translation, or abetted it, or showed approval of it, were condemned to everlasting perdition according to the learned writer; and I was solemnly advised to give up my nefarious work and translate instead (of all imaginable substitutes) the commentary of Tabari! Now the commentary of Tabari is of enormous bulk (the commentary of Beydawi is but of a digest of it) and would besides require another commentary of equal length to make its methods and mentality intelligible to English people who had never studied a Quran commentary.

Having read that diatribe, I at once sat down and drafted a reply in Arabic. This I took to an Egyptian friend who put in the customary journalistic compliments which I did not know. I then made a fair copy of the letter and took it to the office of *Al-Ahram*. In that letter, after compliments, I humbly asked: "Is it lawful for an Englishman, who is a Muslim, who has studied the commentaries of the men of old and has some reputation as a man of letters with his countrymen, to try to expound the glorious Quran to his people in their own language at the present day?"

It was some time before my letter was published. In the interval appeared other letters on the subject, all on my side. One sheykh of Al-Azhar wrote declaring translation to be not only lawful but meritorious, and offering to prove his case against the Sheykh Muhammad Shakir in a public disputation. The Sheykh Shakir had claimed that there was a fetwa (general agreement) on the subject. This correspondents flatly denied. It was evident that there were two opinions in Al-Azhar itself. I heard also some private discussions which showed me that many Egyptian Muslims

were as surprised as I was at the extraordinary ignorance of present world conditions of men who claimed to be the thinking heads of the Islamic world — men who think that the Arabs are still “the patrons,” and the non-Arabs their “freedmen”; who cannot see that the positions have become reversed, that the Arabs are no longer the fighters and the non-Arabs the stay-at-homes but it is the non-Arabs who at present bear the brunt of the Jihad; that the problems of the non-Arabs are not identical with those of the Arabs; that translation of the Quran is for the non-Arabs a necessity, which, of course, it is not for the Arabs; men who cannot conceive that there are Muslims in India as learned and devout, as capable of judgment and as careful for the safety of Islam, as any to be found in Egypt.

I have already mentioned how a former translation of the Quran by a Muslim was publicly burnt and further copies of it were forbidden to be brought into Egypt. Walking in one of the most crowded streets of Cairo, I saw two English translations by non-Muslims very prominently displayed in the window of a European bookshop, one of them having on its paper jacket a picture representing our Prophet and the angel Gabriel! Where, I asked myself, can be the sense in burning and banning a well-intentioned reverent work while these irreverent translations can, under the Capitulations, enter freely?

At length, the answer to my letter from the Sheykh Muhammad Shakir appeared in *Al-Ahram*. This time it was no diatribe but a frank and generous admission that such a work as I had mentioned might be not only lawful but meritorious. He was a little dubious over one expression in

my letter, when I spoke of explaining the Quran in a way that my countrymen would understand. He seemed to fear that this might mean some alteration to suit modern views. But I had been thinking only of his suggestion that I should translate Tabari — whose explanations are not given in a way my countrymen would understand.

Fuad Bey came up from Alexandria, having followed all the correspondence in the Press. He said that he had been alarmed when he saw the Sheykh Shakir's attack, but had felt quite reassured on reading my reply to it. He was now glad that the whole question had been raised because there was a chance of settling it once and for all. It had become a scandal and disgrace to Egypt. He gave me a copy of the leading comic paper, in which was an article making gentle fun of the Sheykh Shakir. Public opinion was undoubtedly against that gentleman.

It was just then that my friend and, for the time, collaborator, Ghamrawi Bey brought me an invitation from the Young Men's Muslim Association to a tea party, with the request that I should make a speech afterwards. He himself went to the headquarters of the Association, a large house with tennis-courts adjoining it near Qasr-ul-Aini, every day from his flat at Heliopolis, after he had returned home from his day's work at the College of Medicine. He told me that he held a regular reception there of young men who had conceived any doubts about religion owing to their modern education, telling them, as a scientist, what he thought upon the matter; and that he had been able to convince a number of them. He was so good a man, and

had been of such great help to me, that I was unwilling to refuse his first request.

At the same time, the function, especially the speech, meant disturbance of my peaceful existence given up to work. I at length agreed only on condition that I might be allowed to speak *ex tempore* and in English to the students, as to prepare a speech, especially a speech in Arabic, would take more time than I could spare from the revision work. To this my friend at last consented, undertaking himself to interpret my remarks for the benefit of those present who might not know English.

Accordingly he called for me one evening before sunset, and we walked together to the place in time for *Maghrib* prayer. Then there was a rather long reception of all the notables who had been asked to meet me, and then we went to tea. By that time I knew something of the composition of my audience, and could see that the sort of speech which I had meant to make would be unsuitable.

From the number of turbans and long flowing robes I judged that all Al-Azhar was present, where I had expected to see only modern students. With trepidation I realized that I must make some kind of speech in Arabic if I wished to make a good impression on these people, and must also change the purport of my English speech. But the English was for later on. At the moment I had to concentrate my thoughts intently on the preliminary remarks that I might make in Arabic, and leave the rest to Providence. The minute tea was over we went into the lecture hall, already crowded. I was put up in a sort of pulpit, Ghamrawi Bey

took stand beside me; Sheykh Rashid Rida was somewhere near me on the right, and from the middle of the hall I saw the face of Muhammad Ali Bey Kamil and beside him that of Fuad Bey's son, staring at me, as it seemed, with horror. They were the only persons known to me in all that crowd.

Somebody spoke in introduction — I suppose it was Ghamrawi. Then my turn came. Feeling infinitely small, I said : “*As-salamu ‘aleykum wa rahmatu’llahi wa barakatuh*” — “Peace be with you and the mercy of Allah” — and the immediate response from the whole audience brought some courage to my heart.

I spoke in Arabic for five minutes, merely apologizing for the fact that I was going afterwards to speak in English, explaining why I had asked leave to do so, and telling one short anecdote. It was nothing much, but it sufficed to win the turbaned section of the audience. Then came the speech in English, Ghamrawi Bey translating every paragraph. I had meant to tell the students about Hyderabad and the work of education that is being done there; and I began with something of that. I told them of the foundation of Osmania University. I described the Friday congregation at the Mecca Masjid, I told them how His Exalted Highness goes every Friday to the Mosque (at that there was applause and one old man exclaimed: “Ah, would that it were so in Egypt!”), and then, thinking I had said enough to show them that I came from no benighted land, I talked to them about the future of Islam.

Muslims felt despair because they were defeated. It was only natural. But was there any reason for despair? Was

there not a clear analogy between our present condition and that of the Prophet and his comrades at Al-Hudeybiyah, when the Muslims asked “Where is now the victory that we were promised?” and even Omar made remarks of which he ever afterwards repented. Yet the Truce of Al-Hudeybiyah, though it seemed so ignominious for the early Muslims, was in fact the greatest victory that Islam had until then achieved. Until then war had set a rigid barrier between the Muslims and their opponents, but with the truce the barrier fell down, the two parties mingled and conversed together, with the result that in the two years that elapsed between the truce of Al-Hudeybiyah and the conquest of Mecca — years of peace with the idolators — the number of converts to Islam was far greater than the total number of all previous converts. [\[See Note 2\]](#)

For centuries war had set a rigid barrier between the Muslim world and Christendom, and now that barrier is down, no matter that the terms of settlement seem ignominious to the Muslims. That settlement may yet prove to be the greatest victory that Al-Islam has yet achieved, on one condition — a hard one — that all Muslims show again in their conduct the faith and virtue of the early Muslims. “Or do you think,” I asked them, “that Al-Islam was propagated by the sword?” (When the question was translated by Ghamrawi Bey there were anguished cries of “No!” and “God forbid!”) I told them how the Arabic-speaking peoples are respected by non-Arabs, more especially in India; how we look to them for example; and I asked them to furnish that example. My speech ended, the Sheykh Rashid Rida spoke supporting all I had said.



When he visited India, the people had flocked to pay him honour only because he was an Arab and came from the land of Nabi Yusuf. He quoted the words of the late Sheykh Muhammad Abduh: “We (Arabs) by our conduct are the hindrance to the spread of Al-Islam to the West. They see our religion through us as through a dirty window, and misjudge it consequently.”

Then a sheykh in Azhari dress got up and with deep emotion thanked me in the name of Al-Azhar for all that I had said. The whole incident had nothing to do with translation of the Quran, but after it there was no further public cavilling at my translation.

We moved out to Heliopolis for Ramadan, in order that I might be nearer to Ghamrawi Bey, whose home was there; and our work of revision was completed in the blessed month.

Fuad Bey came up to Cairo for the Eid. The time for our departure was drawing near. Fuad Bey, Ghamrawi Bey and I drove to Helwan to see the Sheykh Al-Maraghi, and in the course of the visit Ghamrawi made his general report of my work. On the strength of that report the good Sheykh wrote some words of warm approval which I treasure as coming from an altogether upright man, incapable of writing anything that he does not think true.

On a former visit he had read out to me all the passages in the writing of the immediate disciples of the Imam Abu Hanifah which made him, a Hanafi teacher, hold translation of the Quran lawful. He had been anxious that I should

know his authority, and should not suppose that he, any more than the opponent party, scorned Tradition. On this last visit I felt it my duty to tell him that my translation would fall short of the condition laid down by Abu Hanifah in one respect: it would not show the Arabic text side by side with the translation. He asked: "Why not?" and I explained that there were several reasons. For one thing, it would cost a great deal more; for another, it would repel non-Muslim readers who, glancing at the book and finding it half-full of Arabic, would lay it down unread as something quite outside their sphere of interest; for yet another, Islam had been attacked and prejudiced by means of translations of the Quran, without the Arabic, circulated among non-Muslims. Even if translation had been quite unlawful, as our opponents claimed, it would have been sanctioned, in the circumstances, by the verse of the Quran:

"The sacred month for the sacred month, and forbidden things (are lawful) in retaliation. So whoever hath attacked you, attack him with the like of that wherewith he hath attacked you. And keep your duty to Allah and know that Allah is with those who keep their duty."

If things forbidden by Allah, like warfare in a sacred month, become lawful in retaliation, so evidently must things forbidden only by the Ulama. I must have spoken with some heat for when I paused for some breath, the Sheykh said: "If you feel so strongly convinced that you are right, go on in God's name in the way that is clear to you, and pay no heed to what any of us say." As he uttered the words he smiled at me, and we both emerged from the cell

erected by the schoolmen of the middle ages of Islam, in which we had been talking until then.

*“Quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle.”* [\[See Note 3\]](#)

On the day before that on which my wife and I were to leave Cairo, a Bedawi chief, who was a member of the new Parliament, at Fuad Bey’s instigation, asked us to a luncheon party; and to that luncheon party came the present Grand Sheykh of Al-Azhar, official leader of those Ulama who hold translation of the Quran unlawful — a very handsome and benignant-looking old man in a beautiful dove-coloured robe and snowy turban. At table, I was placed at his right hand. Except Hilma Pasha Aisa, an ex-minister, the remainder of the party consisted of men who had proved their devotion to Islam in the opinion of the Ulama; there were all *Mujahidin*, including Fuad Bey, who had been with Mustafa Kemal in the Suez Canal campaign before he became Turkish Minister at Berne. The Sheykh could hardly fail to be surprised to see an Englishman in such a gathering, and when I told him that I was the man who had translated the Quran into English he seemed rather shocked.

After luncheon, when Fuad Bey praised my translation, and all the others called it meritorious, he was evidently much embarrassed, until Fuad Bey remarked: “He will not call it Al-Quran; he will call it *Ma‘aniu’l-Qur’an’l-Majid* (The meaning of the Glorious Quran).” Then the Rector of Al-Azhar smiled. “If he does that,” he said, “then there can be no objection; we shall all be pleased with it.” I was back

again in the medieval cell, but we had reached a peaceable conclusion, as I thought, and I was glad of it.

That was in March 1930. My translation was published in December of the same year. In April 1931 I received a letter from Ghamrawi Bey informing me that the Rector of Al-Azhar had sent for him (Ghamrawi) and asked him many questions about my translation. It seemed that he was inclining to condemn it, after all. The latest rumour was that Al-Azhar had decided that the work must be translated word for word back into Arabic and submitted to their judgement in that distorted form, as none of the professors could read English. It was certainly a great advance beyond the method of condemning without trial pursued in the case of Maulvi Muhammad Ali's English version, showing that, even within Al-Azhar, there is now a party of enlightenment strong enough to force withdrawal from the old position. I replied with every argument that I could reach, of which Ghamrawi might make use of in conversation with the Ulama.

The approval or the condemnation of Al-Azhar, or indeed of all the Ulama of Egypt, could not help or injure my translation much; but from what I had so lately seen in Egypt I could judge that condemnation, after all that had already happened, was very likely to bring a degree of ridicule upon Al-Azhar, which I should be the first to deplore. Al-Azhar is a great historic institution which one would wish to see reformed and not demolished. I asked Ghamrawi to implore them not to treat allies as enemies.

Subsequently I have learnt from a newspaper report that, after examining my work in the distorted form already mentioned, the Rector of Al-Azhar pronounced it, “though the best of all translations,” unfit to be authorized in Egypt. The reason given for the ban is that I have translated idiomatic and metaphorical Arabic phrases literally into English, thus showing that I have not understood their real meaning. Happily, he gave an instance which was quoted in the newspaper, so that I can understand the meaning of the accusation. I have translated Surah XVII, v.29, thus: “And let not thy hand be chained to thy neck nor open it with a complete opening lest thou sit down rebuked, denuded.” He considers that, by thus translating the Arabic words literally, I have turned a commandment relating to miserliness and generosity into a commandment concerning the position of a man’s hands! How should he know that we speak of “open-handedness” and “tight-fistedness” in English and that every English reader will understand my literal translation in precisely the same sense in which the Arabic reader understands the Arabic text. The ban is therefore based upon an altogether false assumption.

From the opening of the question, as I gather from a report in Al-Ahram, there had been strong difference of opinion between

- the Ministry of the Interior
- and Al-Azhar

as to the merits of the work,

- the former championing its merits with surprising vigour.
- But Al-Azhar, with the King behind it, is supreme in all such matters.

There is something hopeful in the actual condemnation, the terms of which are wonderfully mild, one might almost say favourable, to the translator as compared with former pronouncement of the same authority. It makes the close of a long chapter in the history of the relations of Arabs and non-Arabs — a chapter of whose tenour the Prophet would assuredly have disapproved — since the position that all translation of the Quran is sinful has been quite abandoned. A translation of the Quran by a Muslim has been examined and a literary reason has been given for its condemnation. That is a great step forward.

*(Loyal Enemy by Anne Fremantle, pages 408–419)*

---

## Notes by **Zahid Aziz**

### **Note 1:**

Pickthall has made mention of Maulana Muhammad Ali's English translation at four places in this extract. We have linked them here as follows: [1](#), [2](#), [3](#) and [4](#).

### **Note 2:**

In the two paragraphs beginning “Muslims felt despair because they were defeated”, part of Pickthall’s speech to an Arab audience, the notion he presents — namely, that the best chance for the spread of Islam among its Christian opponents is at a time when there is peace between Muslims and Christians, even though it is a peace in which the Muslims have been reduced to being the subjects of the Christians — is the same as the outlook promoted by Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad and the Ahmadiyya Movement. Maulana Muhammad Ali, in his English book *Muhammad The Prophet*, first published in 1924, drew the same parallel as Pickthall draws here between the peaceful situation after the treaty of Hudaibiya and the situation in which Muslims find themselves now with respect to their opponents. Compare what Pickthall has written above with the following written by Maulana Muhammad Ali in 1924, where we have italicised the points of comparison:

“Europe is daily awakening to the nobility and purity of his [the Holy Prophet’s] character. ... Of course, such an appreciation must now come, *as it did before, in the wake of a general state of peace*. ...The time has come when *closer contact with the Muslim world* may disillusion Europe of its wrong notions concerning Islam; when it may come to realize, *as did the enemies of Islam thirteen centuries ago*, that the fair face of Islam is free from the stigmas with which ignorance and prejudice have disfigured it....Strange are the ways of God and little wonder that *the history of Islam should repeat itself*. Those bent upon its destruction may fall victim to its moral force, *as happened at the conclusion of the truce of Hudaibiya*.” (*Muhammad The Prophet*, Ch. Truce of Hudaibiya)

**Note 3:** “Quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle.” This is Italian and is a quotation from Dante’s *Inferno*, meaning literally: “whence we came forth to see the stars once more”.

Pickthall is using this as a poetic analogy for his relief on having concluded the laborious ordeal of overcoming the opposition he faced.

---

## Transliteration

In this account as printed in *Loyal Enemy*, Arabic terms and names have been transliterated using diacritical marks. We have removed the diacritical marks in the above reproduction for ease of searching the text. Below we provide a list of all these words as they occur above without diacritics and as they occur with diacritics in the book.

Quran	Qur'ân		Beydawi	Beydawî
Ulama	'Ulama		Qasr-ul-Aini	Qasr-ul-'Aîni
Al-Maraghi	Al-Marâghi		Rashid Rida	Rashîd Ridâ
al-Higazi	al-Higâzi		Muhammad Ali Bey Kamil	Muhammad Alî Bey Kâmil
Ismail Bey Shirin	Isma'il Bey Shîrîn		Nabi Yusuf	Nabî Yûsuf
Lutfi Bey	Luftî Bey		Abduh	'Abduh



Al-Ghamrawi	Al-Ghamrâwî		Imam Abu Hanifah	Imâm Abû Hanîfah
Shakir	Shâkir		Hilma Pasha Aisa	Hilma Pasha A'îsa
Tabari	Tabarî			

Muhammad Umar Chand prepared this page on 30 June 2022 for the benefit of research scholars and community readers.